

Dr. Roger Green, Reformation to the Present,

Lecture 2, Medieval Catholicism

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This is Dr. Roger Green in his Church History course, Reformation to the Present. This is session 2, Medieval Catholicism.

But in terms of introductory remarks, by introduction to the course without starting lecture one, I just want to mention a few things, just kind of, for you to keep in mind as you're studying in this course, and before we get to the first lecture, some what I call some kind of considerations that I'd like you to think about as you're studying theology in this course.

So, okay, one consideration: We're going to try to be faithful to these throughout the course. We'll see how well we do. But the first consideration is what we want to do in the course, which is really to major in the majors.

We want to really concentrate on what is major, what is really significant, what is really important. We mentioned ideas, events, and people, and we really want to stick to that and concentrate on that. It is very easy in theology to get kind of sidetracked, and so forth, but we want to really concentrate on what is of central importance.

And sometimes, we need to make distinctions between what is of critical importance here, life-changing importance, and what is of minor importance. And people don't always make those distinctions. So sometimes they major in the minors, you know, or they minor in the majors.

So, we want to try to do that. So that's kind of one consideration. A second consideration is that we do want to have a spirit of humility as we discuss theology, a spirit of reverence in speaking about theology, and humility in speaking about theology.

Because theology is fairly complicated, as we will see in the course, and we should approach it with a lot of humility. None of us have all the answers. That's why we're learning together in the course.

And I think of a good person as our example would be St. Augustine. St. Augustine wrote, you know, voluminously, of course, and can you imagine what St. Augustine would have produced if he lived in our day, you know, with a computer? I mean, it would have been amazing.

It's amazing what he produced anyway. But St. Augustine approached the whole theological enterprise with a lot of humility and with a lot of reverence. He has become a good model and a good example for us.

He wrote a treatise on the Trinity, just as one example, and in his treatise on Trinity, at the end of the treatise, he begs forgiveness, in a sense, for errors he might have made in speaking about the Trinity and so forth. So, St. Augustine becomes a good model for us. A lot of humility in approaching all of these subjects.

A third thing I want to just mention is that the formulation of theology has been really crucial in the life of the Church. You can't understand the life and the ministry of the Church unless you understand the theology that has moved it, driven it, motivated it. It's really, really, absolutely critical.

And people have died for theology, for theological truths. And so it's just amazing how important these theological truths were to these people, that they were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of these truths. So, the formulation of doctrine and dogma has been crucial.

I think of a man named Maximus the Confessor. Now, Maximus the Confessor had a bit of a conflict with the Emperor because of the way the Emperor happened to be discussing theological matters and so forth. And Maximus the Confessor was willing to stand up to him and say, no, you are wrong in what you are saying.

You're leaving the Church asunder and so forth. It was a really pretty brutal time. But for his trouble, Maximus the Confessor had his tongue cut off and his right hand cut off so that he could no longer speak or write correct theology.

People have literally lived, died, and suffered for the sake of theology. So, it's been crucial in the life of the Church, and it's been really important for the life of the Church. Fourth, just a quick consideration, and we'll see this a lot in the course.

Theology, in a sense, is a reflection of the age in which you live. It's a reflection of history. It's a reflection of what is going on in history.

There's a sense in which history asks the questions, and theology provides an answer to those questions based on the Bible and based on the theological development of the Church. Now, you can't always. We're going to see this a lot in the course, and you can't always tell which comes first. Does history come first, and then theology answers the questions? Or are there things that are theologically important to the age, and so the theology kind of leads the age, leads history? Which comes first? As far as I'm concerned, it's more of a cyclical kind of thing.

Theology answers the questions that the age asks, but on the other hand, theology often asks the question that history needs to answer. So, it's cyclical. We're going to watch for that cyclical kind of history as we do in various ages.

Okay, just two final things. The next to the last is this. In this course, I would never want you to think that theology is a denial of mystery.

Theology is not a denial of mystery. We stand in awe of the great mysteries of the faith. What theology is, is an attempt to understand as much as we are able to with the minds that God has given us.

But at the end of the day, we say we stand in the face of great mystery. We're not trying scientifically or rationally to explain away the Trinity, Christology, or justification by faith. We're not trying to do that.

We're trying to understand as much of it as possible, given the illumination of the Bible and what the church has taught. So, we're trying to understand as much as we can, but we recognize that we often stand in mystery. And we rejoice in that.

We love that. That's wonderful. But on the other hand, we don't leave our brains at the door when we discuss theology either.

We do use the minds that God has given us to try to understand what theology is all about, how it applies, and so forth. And then there's just one more thing. I hope this course will not just be an academic exercise for you.

I hope it will be an exercise of taking the theology that we talk about, applying it to your own life, thinking it through in your own life, your own mind, and working it out in your own life and mind for your own theology. So, it's not just an academic exercise. I hope it's going to be something meaningful and kind of existential for you, too.

And I hope we'll have a good discussion about what we're talking about as you kind of come to this from your own experience and your own understanding. I hope we'll have a lot of good discussions about that, not only when we meet in the lion's den to deal with the text but also when we're here together discussing this material. So those are just some introductory remarks I would have made the other day, but we had to move along just to kind of get things going here.

All right, I'm going to look at Lecture 1, and I go by lecture number and title. Here it is on page 12 of the syllabus. This is Medieval Roman Catholicism and the Nature of Justification.

As you can see, I'm going to do five major topics. I'm going to do five major things in this lecture. Okay, we're going to get to the nature of sin in just a moment, but I do want to give kind of a prolegomenon here first of all.

I want you to know that in this lecture and the lectures that follow, we'll get into John Calvin. We'll do a little bit of Luther in this lecture and then get into Calvin. But in this lecture, I am not talking about contemporary Roman Catholicism.

I'm not thinking about the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. I'm not thinking about the Roman Catholic Church in the 21st century. What I'm trying to do is draw a theological picture for you of the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval world, in the world in which Martin Luther came into and Calvin came into.

That's the Roman Catholicism that I am drawing a picture of. And I'm not necessarily trying to make any connections between that medieval Roman Catholic Church and today's Roman Catholic Church. There are lots of differences, but the fact of the matter is that the medieval Roman Catholic Church was in trouble.

The fact of the matter is that the medieval Roman Catholic Church had some real theological dilemmas and theological problems that needed to be confronted. People like Calvin and Luther came along and did that. But please know that I am talking about that medieval Catholic Church.

That's really critical to understand and take note of. Okay. Now, what I'm doing with A, B, C, and D, the nature of sin, purgatory, penance, and indulgence, what I'm trying to do there is put together a picture of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, the theology of the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

It's like a puzzle, and I'm trying to put that puzzle together for you so we can stand back and look at the picture of the medieval Catholic Church. Number E will be the response of the Reformation. Just see how the Reformation began to respond to all of that before we go into John Calvin. But I hope we can draw a picture for you.

And it's not necessarily a pretty picture all the time. There are some real difficulties here. But I'm hoping to draw the picture, and one relates to the other.

Once you get these four pieces to the puzzle, each of them intersect with each other. You can't have one without the other, in a sense. So that's what we're going to try to do.

Okay. First of all, let's talk about how medieval Roman Catholics felt about sin, how they defined it, how they discussed it, and how they talked about it. As a matter of fact, the medieval Roman Catholic Church divided sin into two different kinds of sin.

So, if you don't understand that already, you don't understand what's going on here when it comes to the nature of justification in that medieval church. So, let's just mention the two kinds of sins that we talk about here. The first is mortal sin.

Medieval Roman Catholic Church talked about mortal sin. And I've got those. They're both on your syllabus, but I'll put them up here as well. Such a mortal sin.

Okay. Let's give a definition of mortal sin. What is a mortal sin in terms of medieval Roman Catholicism? Mortal sin is any great offense against the law of God.

That is a mortal sin. It's any great offense against the law of God, like breaking one of the Ten Commandments, for example. That is a mortal sin.

Okay. Why is it called a mortal sin? It's called a mortal sin because it is the sin that kills you. It's the sin that kills your soul.

It's the sin that is going to really send you to eternal punishment. That's why it's called a mortal sin. So that's kind of bad news.

That's kind of bad news. Commit mortal sin. It kills your soul.

It sends you to eternal punishment. That's kind of bad news. The good news is, however, that mortal sins can and should be, and need to be, in fact, confessed.

If you confess your mortal sins, then what happens is that you will not be sent to eternal punishment for your mortal sins. You're going to confess them, and you're going to be absolved of them. But even after you confess them, you still incur a punishment for doing that mortal sin.

So you confess your mortal sins. You've broken one of the Ten Commandments. You confess to the priest your mortal sin.

That's fine. That's going to mean that you're not going to go to hell for all eternity. But it is not going to release you from punishment.

There is still punishment due to that mortal sin. You still have to do some time, in a sense, for that mortal sin. Now, you're going to do punishment, in a sense, for that mortal sin, both in this life and in the next life.

So, mortal sin is pretty bad. It's pretty bad to break one of the Ten Commandments, you know. So that's the first mortal sin.

So, we want to kind of remember that term and what that's all about. Now, the second kind of sin was called a venial sin. Now, let me give a definition for a venial sin, and then we'll talk about how these two relate to each other.

But venial sins were small and pardonable offenses against God or against our neighbor. Small and pardonable offenses against God and against our neighbor. Now, technically, I mean technically, venial sins do not kill your soul.

Venial sins aren't mortal. They don't kill your soul. They don't send you to eternal punishment.

But when you commit venial sins, you still have some punishment attached to the venial sins that you commit. So, I add 2 and 2 and I get 5. Is that a mortal sin or a venial sin? If I add 2 and 2 and get 5, it's a venial sin. I didn't intend to do that.

I don't intend to dishonor God or my neighbor. I just made a mistake, you know. I didn't mean to, but I made a mistake.

Now, if I'm a merchant and I add 2 and 2 and charge you 5, that's not a venial sin. That's a mortal sin because I have lied to you. But if I just add 2 and 2 and get 5 and just, you know, forgot or slipped my mind or something, that's a venial sin.

Okay, what's the problem here? The problem is that you should also confess venial sins. So even though technically, I guess you don't really have to, you should confess your venial sins. But the second problem here is that as a layperson in the church, and by the way, we're talking about the medieval church here, so as a layperson in the church, you're going to be born, live, and die in your little village in that medieval world.

You are not going to have opportunities to travel and see the world and so forth. Your whole life is going to be pretty much constricted to your little village, and that's been true for generations before you; it's going to be true for generations after you. That is going to be your world.

So, your world is going to be, your religious world is going to be interpreted by that local priest. So, the problem is that there wasn't a fine line between mortal sins and venial sins. What one priest might call a venial sin, a priest in the next village might call a mortal sin.

So, you don't have a fine distinction between mortal sins and venial sins. So without that fine distinction, then, the best thing you can do is to confess all of your sins and do it all the time to make sure that your soul will not be damned forever. So you're a good Christian, you're going to confess your sins, you're going to do it all the time,

you're going to maybe even confess sins that you weren't sure you even did, but you are going to confess your sins because you do not want to go to hell.

You don't want to be eternally damned, you don't want to be eternally separated from God. So, the confession of all your sins is your daily life, and that's what you're all about in your little village. And you have to rely on your priest to tell you what's a mortal sin and venial sins, but you want to kind of protect yourself in a sense.

Now, if you fast forward for just a minute, and by the way, when you confess your sins, the priest is going to absolve you of your sins, but we'll talk about that in another section here. Let's fast forward for just a minute to Martin Luther. Martin Luther went into the monastery; Martin Luther entered the monastery.

Martin Luther was a good Roman Catholic, and when he entered the monastery, Martin Luther felt, as a good Roman Catholic, that he really needed to confess his sins. There was a period when Martin Luther entered the monastery and confessed his sins six hours per day. So, for six hours a day, he was confessing sins.

He was thinking of all of his sins, confessing them. Even his confessor, his father confessor, got tired of hearing him confess all these sins and kind of suggested maybe he doesn't have to do this six hours a day. But what Luther was doing when he confessed six hours a day was that he was kind of, in a sense, demonstrating the fear of being a Roman Catholic in that medieval world.

So he's reflecting on the Roman Catholic culture when he confesses six hours a day of his sins. Martin Luther eventually got out of that, but nevertheless, this kind of fear instilled about mortal sins, venial sins, and the need to confess so you won't go to eternal punishment is pretty strong in that medieval world. So we need to make those, that's the first thing, the nature of sin.

That's the easiest thing to understand in terms of these four pieces of the puzzle we're going to be addressing here. That's the easiest thing to understand, and that's the shortest thing that we deal with, but God bless you. Anything about mortal sin or venial sin? That was a venial sin right there, see, venial sin.

Didn't mean to do it, but mortal sin, venial sin. It's making a mistake, yeah. But the question you would have in your mind, in making that mistake, was I, did I cross the line into a mortal sin? Did I or didn't I? So that's why Luther said, I'm going to confess six hours a day.

I'm going to cover all my bases. It's even broader. Right.

We would not call a mistake a sin. That's right. If I had two and two at five, though, and I just did that, that's a mistake.

Or if I say, aren't we having a nice day today, Wednesday? That's a mistake. That's right. The problem is, though, in the medieval world, you had to rely on your local priest to tell you, and what one priest might tell you is a venial sin. Another priest might tell you is a mortal sin.

So you are not sure. So with that lack of assurance, you're going to confess everything all the time, and that's why Luther was confessing six hours. So, it is a different kind of view of sin.

But remember, this is medieval Roman Catholicism we're talking about, though. Something else here. Sin.

Does anybody want to talk about sin today? Does anybody want to confess sin today? Sin. Okay, that's the easiest. That gets us started.

Okay, the B here is the doctrine of purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory. Okay, let's talk about the doctrine of purgatory.

It was very big in the medieval world. Purgatory was really, really big in the medieval world. All right.

The first thing we want to say is, in the medieval world, when you were baptized, and in the medieval Roman Catholic world, you're baptized as an infant. In the medieval world, when you are baptized, the minute you are baptized, your original sin is done away with. So your original sin is washed away.

But any sins that you have committed up until that point are also dealt with. So now you were baptized as an infant. So technically, the minute you were baptized, if you did not live to commit any sins, you would go immediately to heaven.

So if you're baptized and you do not sin, you're just going to go right to heaven. Now some people tried to play a little bit of fast and loose with this. Constantine, or Constantine, tomato, tomato, as far as I'm concerned, whatever you want to call him.

Emperor Constantine became a Christian, but he wasn't baptized until his deathbed. The reason he wasn't baptized until his deathbed is because he believed that once he was baptized and he didn't sin, he was going to go right to heaven. A baptism would wash away his original sins and all the sins that he had committed up until that point.

So, Constantine waited to be baptized until he was on his deathbed for that reason. That's not a good thing. That's like playing Russian roulette in a sense.

But anyway, if you are baptized and you die, you're going to go to heaven. For most people, it doesn't work that way. Most people are baptized in their infancy, and they're going to live 20 or 30 years or so, and they're going to commit sins.

So, every believer, except those who die immediately when they're baptized, every believer when they commit sin, they've got a punishment that is due to the sin that they've committed. And they're not going to work off that punishment in this life. They're not going to be able to.

So what they have to do is work off the punishment in the next life. Now the question is, where are they going to work off that punishment? And the place where they're going to work off that punishment is a place called purgatory. So purgatory is where all baptized believers go after they die for a certain period of time, and they're paying the punishment due to the sins that they've committed in this life.

They're finishing off the punishment due to sins that they've committed in this life. They are being purged in purgatory. And only as they are being purged and being, you know, you put iron in the fire. What does that do? That strengthens the iron.

So only as they are being purged are they eventually going to be able to be with God. So, it's only through that experience that they're going to be able to be with God. So everybody is basically going to go to purgatory, to this place of punishment, really, this place of purging.

There are a couple of exceptions to that. One exception is if you are a martyr for the faith. If you are a martyr for the Christian faith, you've already gone through purgatory.

That is your purgatory. That is your purging. And martyrs will go to heaven immediately.

If you are one of the saints of the Christian faith and have lived an exemplary life, like Mary, for example, Mary didn't go to purgatory. Mary was assumed into heaven and taken right into heaven. So, if you're one of the saints of the church living an exemplary life, you will go to heaven, not go to purgatory.

And a little bit of a rankling here among the common people, but many times higher clergy, if you attain the level of a higher clergyman, especially a pope, you're going to go right to heaven. You're not going to go to purgatory because you have this exemplary life, and also, you have this exemplary work that God has given you to do. Now, there is a little problem because, in the medieval world, many of the clergy were really scandalous people.

There were popes who were scandalous in the medieval world. And the thought of the common people that they're going to go to heaven, but I'm not, I'm trying to live an exemplary life, I'm trying to confess my sins and so forth, but this scandalous cardinal or this pope is going to go right to heaven, that didn't sit too well with people obviously. But there's no doubt that, basically, all believers are going to go to purgatory.

And that's the way it's going to be. So yeah, it was common knowledge to the people that the cardinal, that the pope, went right to heaven and, or that some cardinals went to heaven. The word would get around, right? Even though they're living in their little village, a little town, and so forth, word would get around about the kind of lives these people are living, especially after Luther.

Because of Luther, the invention of the printing press, and Martin Luther, he was glad to get that word around to people. So yeah, so word would get around. They might live in a village where the priest was living a pretty scandalous life, but the priest would gladly say he's going to go right to heaven and not to purgatory like they are.

And so, it was just, yeah, not quite fair. The purgatory wasn't quite fair. How long you're going to be there is unknown.

So, it depends on the sins that you've committed and what punishment is due to your sins. But we'll talk about that in just a minute. Okay.

Purgatory is not based on the Bible. There were no biblical references in terms of the canon that Protestantism accepts, but it was based on the biblical record that Roman Catholicism accepts. This doctrine was based not only on the tradition of the church teachings of the church but also on 2 Maccabees 12:39-45.

So, if I think of it sometime, I'll bring in the 2 Maccabees passage, and I'll read that passage to you. But they did feel that they had a kind of a handle on this from a biblical passage and not just from tradition. Okay.

Now, here's the assumption that they are making. Now this would be a theological assumption that the reformers would disagree with. So, here's the assumption that the doctrine of purgatory was built upon.

The assumption was that while God forgives us our sins, he does forgive us our sins, obviously, through the ministering of the church and the ministering of the priest. But the assumption is that while God forgives us our sins, he is nevertheless a God of justice who is going to hold us accountable for our sins. So he demands, in a sense, this punishment of us, not only in this life, but he demands this punishment in the next life in purgatory.

Now, eventually, you're going to go and meet God because purgatory is not hell. Purgatory is a place of purging for believers to go to meet God. Hell is a total separation from God.

But it was kind of this nature of God that was under scrutiny by the reformers when they came along and said, well, what kind of a God was the medieval Roman Catholic church developing? What kind of a God were they kind of handing the people? And they were handing the people this nature of God who does forgive, but almost out of anger for our sins that we've committed, he is going to demand a just punishment for us, both in this life and in the next life. Okay, now let me just mention how an average Roman Catholic person in the town, how an average Roman Catholic person thought about purgatory. And there are four things that we'll mention here.

What does the average Roman Catholic person think about purgatory? Here's a medieval image of purgatory. And so this is just one, you could get a lot. But notice the people are burning, it's purging, it's fire.

Now, the good news is there are angels helping people once they've passed purgatory. There are angels who are helping people get out of this and go to heaven. Nevertheless, this was a common medieval imagery of purgatory.

Okay, if you were just a common everyday person living in your village and trying to do the best you can in life, there were four things that came to your mind about purgatory. Here are four things that you kind of thought about purgatory. Okay, number one, the first thing you knew, you believed in your heart that all of your relatives and friends were suffering in purgatory.

There is no doubt that all of your relatives, all of your friends who have died and gone on before you, are in purgatory. And this is the image that they have of purgatory. It's a very kind of imagery of suffering in the fire.

So that's not kind of a good way to think of your mother and your father and your brothers and sisters and friends when you think of the afterlife. To think of them suffering in this way, that's pretty bleak, you know. So, that's the first thing.

When you think of your relatives and friends who have died, this is what you're thinking of right here. So that's number one on your thought kind of process. Okay, number two, the second thing that you know for sure is that they cannot help themselves.

There is nothing they can do in purgatory to help themselves out of this. If they're there for three or four or five hundred years or for a thousand years, that's the way it's going to be. They cannot help themselves in any way.

So, they just have to, you know, grin and bear it in a sense. Okay, number three, God will not help them until his sense of justice has been satisfied. So, number three, here's the image of God again that the reformers would react against, but God's not going to help these people until his justice has been satisfied.

When the angels here in the picture are taking these two people who have kind of finally made it through purgatory, the angels are doing it only because God's justice has been totally satisfied with these two people, and they've done all the punishment they need to do now to go to meet God. So that's the third thing. So God's not going to help them.

Now the question is, what kind of a vision of God is that? What kind of a view of God is that? Okay, number four, eventually, so the word eventually here is very important when it comes to the history of purgatory, but eventually, in Roman Catholic thinking in the medieval world, there was a belief that you could shorten the time of your friends and relatives who are in purgatory. Now, it takes a while for that to happen. Historically, it takes a while for that to happen, but eventually, there is a system that the Roman Catholic Church installs in the kind of theological system by which you can help your friends or family shorten their time in purgatory.

In fact, there is a system by which you can actually get your friends and family out of purgatory. Now, it takes some time to work through that. We'll talk about that when we talk about indulgences.

But that fourth point becomes kind of the good news in the sense of purgatory in the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Boy, I can help get my mother out of purgatory or get my father out of purgatory. So we'll see how that happens.

Okay, now another thing about purgatory: someone has to be in charge of all of this. Someone has got to determine when you sin what punishment is due to your sin, what punishment is kind of attached to your sin, and how much of that sin you're going to work off in this life, how much of that sin you're going to have to work off in purgatory. Is it going to be 20 years, 40 years, 100 years or something? Is there a way to get people out of purgatory? So someone's got to be in charge of all of this.

Someone's got to do the bookkeeping for all of this. Well, the person in charge of purgatory and, therefore, of people's lives and of people's destinies is the Pope. The Pope is in charge of purgatory.

The Pope determines the length of sentences. The Pope determines how sentences can be shortened and how people can get out of purgatory. It's all under the jurisdiction of the Pope, one person.

Now this is a little bit of power for one person, wouldn't you say? I'd say this is a bit of power that that person has in his hands. If he's in charge of purgatory and in charge of everybody's destiny, that's a lot of power. And in the hands of a good Pope, that's still a lot of power, but in the hands of a bad Pope, this is really, really problematic, isn't it? As a matter of fact, the Pope has power, and we'll see when we get to indulgences that the Pope has the power to get people out of purgatory immediately.

So, he can say, I'm getting someone out of purgatory immediately. That's a lot of power, isn't it, in one person's hands to be able to do that. So, this becomes very problematic because purgatory is linked to the papacy, and the papacy is linked to purgatory.

They are inextricably tied together. They are inextricably connected. And so he is ruling over your lives, not only in this world, but he's ruling over your lives in the next world in purgatory as well.

He's in charge, one person, a lot of power. So that becomes kind of problematic, I guess you could say. Okay, so let's stop there for just a minute.

The first piece of the puzzle is sin, mortal sin, venial sin, two kinds of sin, and so forth. That's the first piece of the puzzle. The second piece of the puzzle is purgatory, very much connected to sin because it's where you go to work off the punishment due to every sin that you've committed in this life.

You can start working them off in this life, but you'll never finish working them off in this life. So you're going to go to purgatory. So, the second piece of the puzzle is purgatory.

So, who wants to talk about sin and or purgatory? Are we clear here about what's going on? Are we getting the picture of what's going on in this Catholic medieval church? It may not be part of your world, but this was the world of the medieval Roman Catholic church. Anything here? Are you doing okay? Okay, all right, let's move on to penance. Let's move on to penance, and then we'll move on to indulgences.

Okay, so number three of the picture is penance. Now, there are two ways I'm going to describe penance. First, I'm going to describe it as a sacrament because in the medieval Roman Catholic church, penance was a sacrament.

It was kind of a visible sign of God's invisible grace. So, the second way is just kind of the general way, though the man on the street talks about penance. How does that happen? So, okay, first of all, as a sacrament.

Okay, as a sacrament, penance has four kinds of steps to it, I guess you might say. So, here are the four steps. Step number one is you sin.

Well, everybody sins, so we're all in that first step. Okay, all right, that's the first big step, you sin. Okay, now the second step is that you confess.

God bless you; you confess your sins. Step number two is you go to the priest and you confess your sins. Not only your mortal sins, your venial sins, just confess your sins, all of your sins.

I mean, that's going to cover you kind of, so that becomes really, really important. Okay, the third step in the whole system of penance is you now receive absolution from the priest. The priest absolves you of your sins.

You receive that absolution. He pronounces that absolution on you, and that's good. I mean, that's a wonderful thing.

Step four is when the priest assigns you certain works to do in this life to pay off the punishment that was attached to your sins. So, the priest is going to assign works to you, and these are works of penance that you're going to do. Now, we'll talk later about what those works are, but the priest is going to assign you those works of penance.

Okay, so four steps: sin, confession, absolution by the priest, and then he's going to assign you works of penance that you have to do to work off that punishment that you have to do. Now, just under this system as a sacrament, you know, play fast and loose. Supposing you leave the priest, he's absolved you of your sins, and he's assigned some works of penance for you to do.

Supposing you leave and you decide, I'm not going to do those works of penance. You've got to be kidding me. I am just not going to do those.

That's a mortal sin. Your soul is now going to go to hell until you go back into that church, confess to that priest that you didn't do the works of penance that he assigned to you, and so now you've got to confess that sin as well as others, and so you're back to it. You cannot escape the cycle that is built into the whole sacrament of penance.

You can't, because if you try to when you walk outside and you don't do those works of penance, you're committing mortal sin. You're back to square one here. So, you've got to do those works of penance if you are a sincere believer, and if you are a sincere Christian, and you want to please yourself and please God.

You have no other choice. So, it's a cycle. It's an important cycle.

Four steps. You know you can't get away from it. Okay, that's penance as a sacrament.

That's kind of the theological understanding of penance. That's kind of the theological picture of penance. The second way, let's just define penance and how people on the street talked about penance.

People on the street didn't talk about penance in this kind of theological framework of everything. People on the street referred to penance only as those works assigned by the priest. They said, we're doing penance.

So, penance to them was just something you do. It's something you have to work off to work off this punishment. So, it was a very simple kind of understanding of working off the punishment, doing the penance.

Okay, now the question about penance is, why was this whole system of penance inaugurated by the church? Why did the church have this? Why did the church do this? Well, they're actually was a pretty kind of positive reason for the church inaugurating penance and bringing penance into the life of the church as a sacrament. The positive reason, it seems a little negative I think to us because you confess, I mean you sin, you confess, you receive absolution, then you've got to do these works. It seems a little negative to us.

But the church had really a positive reason for doing this. The church's reason for doing this was to keep true believers in the bosom of the church. We want to keep these true believers in the life of the church and in the life of the community.

We want to keep them in a state of grace. The only way to keep them in a state of grace and to keep them kind of with God is to have this kind of system of penance because they will always be connected with the church.

They'll always be doing what the church requires. They'll always be part of the community of the church. So while it appears to be kind of negative, there was kind of a positive reason in a sense for this.

A good priest is really trying to serve God in the local village; a good priest really has the desire to keep all those believers in the church and not let them leave the fold, not let them be lost sheep, and so forth. So, there was a positive kind of, I don't know, kind of reason for it. We need to mention that so we don't, so we're not totally, you know, throw out the baby with the bath water with penance in terms of how the medieval Roman Catholic church thought about it.

Okay, now, the question is, what kind of penance would be assigned to you in the medieval Roman Catholic world? Let me just mention a few. So you go, you confess your sins, and what kind of penance is established by the priest. I'm going to give some common ones.

I mean there's a whole list of how you could pay your penance, but here's some common ones. For example, fasting. A priest might require you to fast for a certain amount of time.

After you've gone, you confess your sins, he absolves you of your sins. A priest might require you to fast. And in that fasting, it's a reminder that you had sinned, but now you're absolved of the sin and so forth.

A second one is that a priest might ask you to give the alms in the name of Christ. So, leave the church and give alms to the poor. Share your goods with the poor in the name of Christ.

That could be a work of penance that you might be asked to do. So, there's a second example. A third example might be works of mercy.

For example, works of mercy among the sick, works of mercy among the poor, helping to feed the poor, something like that. But works of mercy, the priest might ask you to do those as a sign of your penance. Something else that, again, I'm just mentioning kind of odds and ends here, but another work of penance was prayer.

A priest might assign your prayer to say the Lord's prayer a certain amount of times, and so forth, prayer. A fifth work of penance, you know, every time I think about this, are you glad? Let me just ask, are you glad that you live in the 21st century? Are you happy you live in the 21st century? Just think of what it would be like to live in the medieval world. And think if you have migraines, for example, if you get migraines or if you get bad toothaches or bad arthritis or stuff like that.

You know, we can take care of that stuff in the modern world. Isn't that a good thing? I mean, isn't that a nice thing that we can take care of? In the medieval world, you just suffered with it your whole life. You suffered with, you know, your migraines or you suffered with your arthritis or you suffered with all kinds of illnesses.

Imagine, you've all had a toothache, haven't you? Imagine if all of your teeth ached all the time, you know. You just suffered with that, you know. It was a tough world.

Imagine if you had to have your arm amputated for some reason, a disease that come into your arm. You know, in today's world, it's tough, but there are things like anesthesia. In that world, you know, you put out your arm, and they saw it off, and that's how it is and, you know, just grin and bear it, you know.

So, if you had something amputated, yikes. So, I'm glad I live in the modern world. I mean, I'm delighted to live in the modern world, especially when it comes to medicine and diseases and cures and so forth. I'm happy.

But one of the penances that the priest would assign to you would be to patiently suffer, patiently suffer. So if you're suffering from lots of diseases, aches, pains, diseases, and so forth, patient suffering is what you were asked to do as a sign of your penance. And do not rail against God for all your sufferings but patiently suffer as something that you've been given in this life as a way of penance, and you should rejoice in it, you know.

So that was a little tough. So now let me mention the last way. I've saved the last as the most important, so I mention it here, and then we will pick up on it when we come back next Wednesday or so.

So the last way of penance, I mean, we could list a lot, a lot. The ones I've listed are just examples. But the last way that I mentioned is the most important.

And the last way is a system that the church inaugurated called a system of indulgences. The church established a system of indulgences as a means of penance for people. Now we've got a whole lecture on indulgences.

Let me just mention indulgence here. What do we mean by indulgence? An indulgence is a remission of a certain amount of time in purgatory. So an indulgence is a remission of time in purgatory.

It's a lessening of the time in purgatory. And the whole system of indulgences became the primary way of penance once we got to the medieval world and once we got to Luther's world and everything. We're not going to worry about that here because we're going to see that as the last piece of the puzzle, number D, the whole system of indulgences.

But here, just to mention it with penance, it's part of the system of penance and so forth. Now, let me just mention a couple of things. I've got a thing here; I'll just be able to get started, but penance is a system of works. What's going on with penance and works that's going on here? Well, in a sense, what God has done is he's established a tribunal in a sense on earth.

The priests are part of the tribunal, God's tribunal. And the priests as part of God's tribunal are going to establish this whole system of works in terms of what we mentioned, sin, confession, absolution, and penance. So, the priests are going to be in charge of that.

Now, the priests do have help here. And let me just mention the bottom line here. No, sorry.

The bottom, no, sorry. The bottom, here it is. Let me just mention some help that the priests have as they assign penance to you.

And this is, I think it is hard to understand myself. But nevertheless, if we put ourselves back into the medieval world, I think we'll get it. It's called works of supererogation.

Okay. Now, to explain works of supererogation, we've got to remember, we've got to take ourselves out of the modern world, postmodern world, whatever world we're living in. We've got to take ourselves out of this world.

We've got to put our minds back into the medieval world. Okay. If you're living in the medieval world, you are picturing life, you are picturing life in the medieval world realistically.

You're picturing heaven, you know, with streets of gold. You're picturing purgatory like we showed the picture of purgatory. That's how you're picturing purgatory.

Or you're picturing hell as people suffering eternally and so forth. But your kind of way of envisioning the world was a literal way. Okay.

Now, part of that is the work of supererogation. So, let me define the works of supererogation. Works of supererogation are excess merits that the saints perform, and these excess merits are performed by the saints and martyrs are stored up in heaven in a treasury.

For example, Mary went right to heaven. There's a church in Jerusalem that kind of is built on that place. So Mary went right to heaven.

Okay. When Mary went to heaven, she did a lot of meritorious work in her lifetime. But she didn't need them for her own salvation, see, because she didn't need to go to purgatory.

She didn't need to pay off. She was sinless, so the church taught. So she didn't need to pay off for any sins that she had committed.

And she's a woman who, in her sinless life, did lots of good things, lots of meritorious things. What's happening to all those meritorious deeds that she did? They're stored up in a storage place in heaven. Now, if you lived in the medieval world, you would literally imagine a treasury of Mary's merits are stored up in that treasury.

And the saints and the martyrs and the popes and everything, there's a lot of merit up there. Okay. Those are called works of supererogation.

Okay. So, therefore, what is the priest able to do for you when you confess your sins, and you've received absolution, and you're given works of penance? The priest is also able to draw from those works of supererogation and to apply those merits to your life. So there's a little bit of accounting that's going on here.

He's drawing from that treasury. He's applying some of those works to you as though they were your works. They're not your work, but they are going to help you in your time of penance, and they're going to help you spend less time in purgatory.

Now, how did all of this happen exactly in terms of accounting? I have no idea because it must have been a massive kind of accounting problem. I do know a bit about indulgences, which we'll get to when we talk about that. But more of this is imaginary than realistic.

But if the priest said, I am taking some merits from Mary, and I'm applying them to your life, you believed it; that was a literal truth for you. He didn't have to kind of prove it to you. You believed it.

It's literally true for you. So, what's he doing then? He's helping you with your penance. He's giving you some excess merits that are going to help you along in your life, and that's a good thing.

So, somewhere in all of this business, I do have to mention the works of supererogation, and this seems to be the natural place to mention them because the works of supererogation are connected with the whole system of penance. So, does that make sense? Are we okay so far? We understand we're not talking about the modern Roman Catholic world. We're talking about the medieval world, and we're just trying to get a picture of it.

Now we've worked hard. So, they give you a day off because you worked so hard. They give you a Monday off.

So, they don't want you to work too hard. So, they give you a Monday off. So, we'll see you next Wednesday.

Time will go fast. Have a good Labor Day weekend. See you Wednesday.

This is Dr. Roger Green in his Church History course, Reformation to the Present. This is session 2, Medieval Catholicism.